



Shadows of slavery

Refractions of the past, challenges of the present

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Alice Bellagamba, Marco Gardini and Laura Menin (eds)

Memories and legacies of enslavement in Chad

Memories of slavery affect contemporary political life in many Sahelian countries, but how do stigmatised groups use those memories as a tool for integration?

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Between August 2014 and June 2015 I carried out fieldwork in Guéra, Chad, a mountainous region which lies between the desert of the Sahel and more fertile savannas to the south. I tried to understand the way people handle the memory of the slave raids from the neighbouring Wadai sultanate: an important player in trans-Saharan trade from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century. I was particularly interested in learning about how people talk about slave raids and the slave camps where raiders used to assemble their victims for months or years before handing them over to traders. The people of Guéra were not necessarily enslaved, but their history was shaped by the fact that they could have been. The memory of having been potentially enslaved lingers on in contemporary political dynamics. In this piece I am particularly interested in one group of people who are known locally as the descendants of slaves, although they reject this label: the Yalnas.

Who were the Yalnas?

Yalnas have two main characteristics that distinguish them from the Hadjiray, or the ‘people of the mountains’, which is a collective term for the people of Guéra. While the Hadjiray were pagans when the

French colonised Chad, the Yalnas were already Muslim. And instead of speaking the local language at home, they use Chadian Arabic as their mother tongue.

The term Yalnas means ‘the sons of the people’ in Chadian Arabic. This may initially appear to be a neutral expression, but it nonetheless has a negative connotation: they became Yalnas because it was impossible for them to establish any other ancestry or origin. I heard two versions of the story for why this was the case. The first version was offered by non-Yalnas, who reported that their origin can be traced to 1911, when the French defeated the Wadai Sultanate and freed many slaves previously held in camps. Since most slaves were said to have spent significant time in slave camps, they were not able to find their families or communities once they were freed. This made it necessary for them to be described in generic and non-specific terms. One respondent reported that “the Yalnas arrived together with the French. We don’t know very well from where do they come from, but what we know is that they have no unique family”.

The second version of the story, which Yalnas tell about their own origins, also relates to slavery. In this case, however, they self-identify as the descendants of the enslavers rather than the enslaved.

Our grandparents were members of Wadai sultan family ... Then, one day, the French arrived. The grandparents understood that French were strong and would have controlled the whole region, so they decided to negotiate with them. When they were asked who they were and who were all the people in the village, they could not say the truth, as the French were still fighting against Wadai. Hence they just told the French that they were all ‘Yalnas’, sons of the people.

There are no written sources about pre-colonial Guéra, which can help

support either the first or the second version of the Yalnas' origins. In 1923, when the French organised the administration of the region, the Yalnas were recognised as a distinct local group and awarded two of the Guéra cantons – gaining formal control of the land and their own political representative in the guise of a *chef de canton*.

Slavery, community and political strategy

In countries like Niger, Mauritania, or Sudan, humanitarian organisations have denounced discrimination against people carrying labels that refer to a slave past. The social trajectory of the Yalnas does not neatly fit the patterns that have been documented in these better known cases. This is partly because the Guéra region is nowadays presented by its inhabitants as a former slave-reservoir, inhabited by groups scattered across the mountains to resist Wadai raids. When the French imposed their power and stopped the slave raids, they obliged all Hadjiray to settle in the plains. The colonial government arranged a local administrative system, appointing a local chief for every group based on the language they spoke.

In such a context, there was not a dominant group of former masters able to keep their former slaves under control, but an array of groups who were trying to settle previously uninhabited territory. The label 'Yalnas' emerged in this process, since it brought previously diverse groups of Muslim Arabic speakers under a single authority and into a specific area of land. Despite the negative connotation, the label Yalnas had no practical adverse effects. People who were brought together as Yalnas accepted this designation for at least partly strategic reasons. Their descendants today often report that, "Yalnas was the name of the canton, not of the people".

The attitude towards the alleged slave past of the Yalnas has changed in the last three decades, along with challenges to their status as a Guéra native group. The Hadjiray of pre-colonial Guéra were not Muslim, but used to believe in mountain spirits. Though there has never been

a clear territorial division among the different Hadjiray groups, the legitimate ownership of the land depended on an ancestral belief in mountain spirits. Yalnas are people who lost – or never had – this ancestral link with the mountains. Their rights over land were instead secured thanks to French recognition and intervention.

The land tenure system only became a major issue for the Guéra region in the 1980s, when the fragile ecology and the pressure of a growing population fostered land conflicts. In this context, the origin of Yalnas began to be used as a tool against them. Neighbours to the predominantly Yalnas village of Kuju, for example, did not accept that the local inhabitants had received compensation for the construction of a mobile network antenna. The case went to court. Another Yalnas village was threatened with eviction on the grounds that their settlement there was illegitimate. In addition to these two big cases, tensions over the control of land between the Yalnas and their neighbours have grown. Yalnas have resisted these incursions by pointing to the colonial documents that recognised their rights, with locally educated officials taking the lead in defending the canton at an official level. However, the situation remains quite fluid, with conflicts related to land issues spreading across the whole region.

Moving beyond slavery?

It has become increasingly difficult to use the label ‘Yalnas’ and in general the category of ‘slave descendants’ in Guéra. The majority of Hadjiray still use the word Yalnas to indicate the people of Jujube and Lampo, the main villages of the two cantons recognised as Yalnas. The use of this label is criticised both in Jujube and Lampo as a way to denigrate them.

Such labels are produced via the political competition between different groups in a particular historical moment, and they acquire their meaning in a broader political framework. While groups labelled as slave descendants in other countries have accepted the past of slavery

as key to the recognition of their rights, peasants of the Guéra region seek to move beyond a term that was once politically convenient.

The people of the former Yalnas cantons have recently been able to rename their cantons. In Jujube they adopted the name of the chief family, coming from Wadai, as a new canton name; in Lampo they got the name from an Arabic family with whom they claim a common genealogy. In both cases I have been told that while their groups are comprised of members of a variety of families, having the name of a Muslim aristocrat family – the Wadai ruling family claims direct descent from the founder of the Abbasid dynasty (the second Islamic caliphate, 750-1250 AD), or from an Arabic family whose ancestors come from the Arabian peninsula – seems a better strategy in the contemporary political situation.

They hope these affiliations to powerful Muslim families will help rid them of any possible reference to slavery. The majority of Hadjray is today Muslim. Links to an important Muslim family, whose members used to raid the Guéra in precolonial times, can increase the prestige of the former Yalnas group. In a region like Guéra, described by its inhabitant as a former slave reservoir for the Wadai, the past of slavery is to a large extent inescapable. But the ways people handle it change over time. Extending our focus to the whole Sahel region, we can see how manifold these strategies are, and how the same kind of policies can lead to opposite political dynamics.

This collection is an outcome of five years of collective research and discussion aimed at bringing the legacies of nineteenth century enslavement together with examples of contemporary bondage and exploitation that may or may not fall under the rubric of ‘modern slavery’. It demonstrates one way of creating a contextually balanced understanding of how the past and present connect with each other, and do not. It interrogates, in the first place, which past matters in specific situations: is it the centuries-long past of the Atlantic slave trade, or the nineteenth century histories of regional and interregional enslavement? All together, these contributions ‘descend’ into the everyday worlds of people who live the consequences of historical slave systems or who happen to find themselves ‘trapped’ in novel forms of socio-political inequality, racism, labour exploitation and sexual and moral violence.

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